



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE SHIRTWAIST TRADE¹

The great strike of the shirtwaist makers, which took place last winter, aroused a widespread interest in the working conditions of the trade. The strike itself lasted about 13 weeks and involved about 400 shops and 30,000 workers. The union demands were: recognition of the union; abolition of the subcontract system; the payment of wages once a week; limitation of the regular hours to 52 a week, and of overtime to not more than three nights a week nor more than two hours a night; a provision that if work was slack all hands should be kept on part time rather than a few on full time; and a provision that employers pay for all materials and implements. The question of wages was left for each shop to settle independently, and some shops made no demand for increase in wages. Settlements were made, according to the secretary of the union, with 356 firms. Of these, 337 settled on a strictly union-shop basis; the other 19 did not include the closed shop. They did not all secure every point desired, though there was in every case a distinct gain for the workers. The full amount of increase in wages demanded was not always secured and in a few shops subcontractors still remain, though these were largely done away with. The conditions agreed upon as to overtime were not always thoroughly satisfactory, but it was felt by the union that if the one great point, collective bargaining, could be secured, the other things could gradually be obtained.

The shirtwaist trade is a new one, only fifteen or twenty years old, and is also peculiarly local. The great bulk of our shirtwaist manufacture is done in New York and Philadelphia and their suburbs, and the whole country is the market for the waists and dresses made here. But new and local as it is, this shirtwaist industry—or the waist and dress industry, as we might more properly call it, for dresses are made by the

¹ A summary of the report of an investigation of the shirtwaist trade in New York City, made by the writers, and presented as a thesis to the New York School of Philanthropy, June, 1910.

same people and in the same shops as waists—has grown to enormous proportions. It does an amount of business in New York City alone which the president of the Associated Waist and Dress Manufacturers estimates is worth a hundred million dollars a year. There are in this city in the neighborhood of 450 factories, employing about 40,000 workers.

The business side of the industry is peculiar and difficult for the very reason that the trade is so new and overgrown and unstandardized. The business may be planned in three ways: "on stock," "on order," or "on contract." The men who work "on order" carry on the bulk of the trade. Their sample makers turn out scores of styles and either their sales agents take these samples about, trying to get orders, or buyers come to the salesrooms of the factory, see the different styles, and give their orders to the factory. This is a business plan which is apt to demand sudden expansion in the busy season and then to leave the factory in the lurch in the slack season. But it is the plan which involves the least risk from change of fashion and the one most widely adopted. Of the shops visited 50 per cent. worked entirely on order and the 35 per cent. which did some stock work also did order work largely. Only one worked entirely on the stock basis. Table I compares the shops working on order with those that work on order and stock, and shows how much greater is the falling-off in the number of workers during the slack season in the shops which do order work exclusively. The falling-off in the stock-work factories is less than half that of the order-work factories.

Most precarious of all and most subject to seasonal change is the contract method of business. It must be distinguished from the *inside* contracting, which has to do with only a part of the work within a single shop. This method of business is adopted by an independent shop which is usually owned by a man just beginning to work into the industry. He is unable to undertake the expense and responsibility of salesrooms and expert designers. He simply owns his machines, hires his own workers, and contracts to do job lots of work for other manufacturers when they are hard pressed during the busy

season. If he is successful in keeping his machines busy, he soon enlarges his shop and takes orders on his own account. The contract shops were hard to find, for this work is usually done in obscure buildings on the lower east side. Of the shops visited, only about 10 per cent. did contract work, and this phase of the industry is, therefore, almost unrepresented in the

TABLE I

DURATION OF SLACK SEASONS AND FLUCTUATIONS OF WORKING FORCE ACCORDING TO METHODS OF BUSINESS

	SHOPS DOING STOCK AND ORDER WORK COMBINED			SHOPS DOING ORDER WORK EXCLUSIVELY		
	Number Months Slack	Ave. Force Busy Season	Ave. Force Slack Season	Number Months Slack	Ave. Force Busy Season	Ave. Force Slack Season
	0	160	160	1½	...	...
	2	200	133	6	200	100
	4	150	110	5½	50	15
	0	40	40	2	100	30
	0	130	130	5	20	8
	0	45	45	3	50	25
	3½	125	75	4½	60	13
	0	200	200	4	250	125
	0	80	80	2	...	...
	2	100	80	1	...	...
	1½	175	50	4	20	8
	2½	90	45	0	160	160
	2	40	19	1½	150	80
	..	...	...	3	60	10
	..	...	...	3	100	75
	..	...	...	3	150	25
Totals.....	17½	1,535	1,167	49	1,370	674
Ave. slack season...	1.34			3.06		
Reduction of force .		24%				50.9%

figures given. Could more of these shops have been found, it is probable that the averages as to wages, etc., would have been lower, for this is known to be the worst class of shops.

The trade is full of surprising differences and contrasts in shop organization. One manufacturer has little knowledge of the methods of the next. The first will claim that it is an advantage to have a single skilled girl do as much of the waist as possible, the second will put his shop upon as extreme a "sectional" basis as he can, and make one garment go through

thirty hands in the making. Again, in one shop the employees work individually, under the direction of a foreman; in another they work in "partnerships"; in a third they are organized in groups of five or six; in a fourth they are under subcontractors, and in a fifth all these methods may be combined.

There is also unusual diversity of work in a single shop. The tasks range from those performed by a skilled operator to the simple cutting of threads, which can be done by an unpracticed girl of fourteen. Adaptability to change is demanded of the worker in a way that is peculiar to this trade. There may be three or four styles made in a single day. There are various materials prevalent in the various seasons and the workers themselves have to shift sometimes from one kind of work to another.

In one other respect the shops differ widely, and that is in their methods of breaking in the "learners." There is no apprentice system, and yet some of the work requires a great deal of dexterity. How do the girls get started? Some get training by working "partners" with a worker who is more experienced. These partnerships are very common. Often two sisters or two friends will be found who have worked together as partners for years. Only one name or one number is put on the payroll, and the partners divide the wages according to some agreed ratio. A partnership with more than two members is called a "group" or "set." Its members are related to each other or are friends, just as are the members of the typical partnership. One group of eight was found which includes four brothers, a sister, a brother-in-law, and two cousins, all paid under one number on the wage book.

This partnership or group system gives one way of breaking in the "learner"; another way is by subcontracting. The subcontracting system is an admitted evil, a system which has been justly fought by the union. The contractor's interest is to get a quantity of work done by driving employees who have not independence enough to sell their services directly to the boss. The best manufacturers all condemn the system and with one exception, there was no subcontracting in any first-class shop.

An important factor in the improvement of trade conditions is the establishment of some standards as to wages, etc., by the manufacturers themselves. At present a chaotic condition exists. Wages for the same kind of work vary greatly in different shops. The different methods of work also make it hard for a girl to change from one shop to another. There is no feeling of unity among the manufacturers. Only a small proportion of them joined the Manufacturers' Association which was organized during the strike. There are many shop owners who have worked up from the trade, starting in at first in a very small way, probably doing contract work, and gradually enlarging their business until now they employ perhaps 200 hands. These men are often extremely ignorant, some scarcely able to write their own names. They are spoken of with great contempt by the better class of manufacturers, the class who joined the Manufacturers' Association. The fact, however, that men can start up a shop on such small capital is responsible for much of the disorganization of the trade.

Manufacturers must also be urged to give more attention to the regulation of the slack season, either by attempting to get their orders in for a longer period, or by doing more stock work. Sometimes a period of extreme dulness follows close on the heels of overtime work. An order will come in and instead of extending it over the slack season, the whole shop is speeded up and worked day and night to get it out.

Hours.—Before the strike, the regular hours in most of the shops, exclusive of overtime, were from eight until six (until five on Saturday), with half an hour at noon, making $9\frac{1}{2}$ hours a day, or 56 hours a week. Some shops were found where the regular hours were still longer, 57, 58, and in one case, 59 a week. In some others they were only 53 or 54 a week. The union agreement provided for 52 hours a week, and these hours were agreed to in the case of every shop with which a settlement was made. In many instances, moreover, shops which did not sign the union contract shortened their hours. In several non-union shops visited the manufacturer mentioned with pride the fact that, even though his shop was not

a union shop, he had reduced his hours since the strike to 52 a week. It is probable that a large number of non-union shops were so affected. On this point, therefore, the strike has been of benefit to the whole trade.

As already stated, the figures just given refer to the regular working hours, exclusive of overtime. During the busy season some shops require overtime 1 night a week, some 2, 3, or 4 nights. Of the 100 girls interviewed 72 could give a fairly definite report of their overtime for the past year and the number of nights which these girls worked was estimated as follows:

TABLE II
OVERTIME WORK: WORKERS' STATEMENT

Number of Nights in One Year	Number of Girls
120 nights.....	1
From 80 to 90 nights.....	4
68 nights.....	1
From 30 to 45 nights.....	8
From 15 to 29 nights.....	17
Less than 15 nights.....	23
None.....	18
Total.....	72

The girl who reported that she had worked 120 nights last year testified that the workers in that shop had stayed four times a week throughout the busy season, which lasted seven months. They worked until 8:30 P.M. at the regular rate per hour, were allowed five minutes for supper, and were given 15 cents for supper money. The same girl had worked 30 Sundays from 8 until 12:30. This extra night and Sunday work, added to the regular 56 hours a week, made the hours throughout the busy season for the factory 70½ a week. The four girls who had worked overtime from 80 to 90 times last year had all put in more than the 60 hours per week which the law prescribes as a maximum. In the shop where the girl worked who spent 68 nights at overtime work, the regular hours before the strike were from 7:30 until 6, or until 5 on Saturday, with half an hour for lunch. This made a 59-hour week, and when to this was added overtime until 8 o'clock, without any supper,

4 nights a week, and Sunday work from 8 until 12 o'clock, the hours of labor during the four months of rush work amounted to 71 a week.

The closing hour in case of overtime work was in 10 cases 7, in 27 cases 8, and in 17 cases 9 P.M. In 7 shops where work continued until 9, half an hour was allowed for supper. Fifteen minutes was allowed in 9 cases and in 32 cases no time was allowed for supper at all. In these shops the girls worked straight through until 7, 8, or even 9 o'clock, perhaps eating a sandwich as they worked at the machine or stopping not longer than five minutes to bolt some food as they sat at their places. When one considers that they had half an hour at noon for a hurried lunch, one wonders how their health stood the strain.

As to the rate of payment for overtime, in 36 cases the regular rate per hour or per piece was paid, in 10 cases the week-workers were allowed time and a half and, in one case only, a week-worker was paid for double time. Piece-workers were in all cases paid only the regular piece price.

When it is considered that in all well-organized trades today compulsory overtime work—and in the shirtwaist trade it is practically compulsory—is always paid for at a higher rate than the regular rate of pay, there is seen to be just cause for complaint here. In practically all of the settled shops the point was gained that there should be not more than two hours overtime in any one night, but very few gained anything as to the rates paid. It is known that 2 shops gained double pay, 7, time and a half, and 1, time and a quarter, but if any others have succeeded in raising the overtime rate it was not so specified in their contracts. The conditions as to overtime, therefore, are still far from satisfactory.

There appeared to be less Sunday work than night work. The reports secured from 72 girls showed that 30 of these had worked on Sundays during the past year, but 26 of them had worked less than 10 Sundays. One had worked as many as 30.

Seasons.—From the employers' statements, the average length of the busy season is 9.4 months and of the slack season 2.6

months. The estimate of the workers is somewhat different. The average for the busy season, as calculated from their statements, is 8.5 months, with 3.5 months slack. The average reduction of the force through the slack season was found from the manufacturers' statements to be 42 per cent. The length of the busy season varies greatly, however, with the different shops, as has already been shown in Table I. Generally speaking, most shops begin to be slack about the first of May, some even in April. By the first of June the trade is very dull, and a large part of the force is laid off until the middle of August or first of September. Then business begins to pick up for those who have a fall season, and from the first or middle of September until December 1, the shop is busy with the fall work. December is usually dull and many are working part time or are laid off. January 1 marks the beginning of the summer season again, which lasts up to May. The fall work consists of silk or wool waists and dresses, but some shops make only cotton goods and do not have a fall season at all. These have a longer dull season.

A definite report as to weeks laid off entirely was obtained from 86 girls. Fifty-two had been laid off, as shown in the following table:

TABLE III
NUMBER OF SHIRTWAIST WORKERS LAID OFF SPECIFIED LENGTH OF TIME

Time Laid Off	Number of Workers
One week.....	2
Two weeks.....	6
Three weeks.....	3
Four weeks.....	11
Five weeks.....	7
Six weeks.....	1
Seven weeks.....	11
Eight weeks or two months.....	3
From 2½ to 3 months.....	8
Total.....	52
Not laid off.....	29
Stopped voluntarily.....	5
Total.....	86

This enforced vacation might not be altogether undesirable could it be a period of real rest, free from care and worry.

This of course it cannot be, except in cases, perhaps, of a very small number of girls who are living at home in families where there are other wage-earners. It must be remembered that these weeks of actual idleness have in all cases been preceded by a period of only part-time work, during which wages have fallen very low, and the majority of the workers have been earning very much less than their normal wage. This period is sometimes more trying for a girl than the other, for it means that she goes to the shop and sits perhaps all day, perhaps half a day, without any work to do but simply staying on in the hope that some work may come in during the course of the day. One man who had made as much as \$22 in one week, and whose average earnings through the busy season amounted to \$18 a week, testified on the night when the investigator talked to him (May, 1910) that his total earnings for the previous week had been \$1.29. Several other workers from the same shop were interviewed the same night, and their wages had all dropped in the same way. The slack season was "on," and from the first of May until the first of September, at any rate, these were the wages they might expect, if they got any at all. Table IV shows the number of months during which 72 workers testified that their work was slack. It will be seen that the periods are much longer than those during which the girls were actually laid off.

TABLE IV
LENGTH OF SLACK SEASON ACCORDING TO WORKERS' STATEMENTS

Number of Months	Number of Workers
No slack season	2
From 1 month to 1 month, 29 days	4
From 2 months to 2 months, 29 days	11
From 3 months to 3 months, 29 days	16
From 4 months to 4 months, 29 days	16
From 5 months to 5 months, 29 days	10
From 6 months to 6 months, 29 days	12
7 months	1
Total	72

It is often hard for even the best-educated class of wage-earners to plan to make their money last over a period when they are not paid. School teachers often find themselves, at the

end of a vacation without pay, counting anxiously the weeks until the first payday in the fall, and this in spite of the fact that they were perfectly aware throughout the whole year that the two months without pay were coming. Even with a good wage, it takes a careful, far-seeing person to plan ahead for a dull season, and a seasonal trade is, therefore, always extremely hard for a wage-earner, even if he has been making very high wages during the busy season. With shirtwaists in demand as they are, throughout the entire year, it hardly seems necessary that the seasonal fluctuation should be so great as it is in this trade, and the fact that a few manufacturers have so planned their business that they have a steady trade all the year round makes it seem quite probable that more could do so with careful planning. If retail houses could be forced to give their orders farther ahead, it ought to eliminate overtime work and give steady work at regular hours over a longer period. This can gradually be forced by a well-organized union among the workers themselves, if the manufacturers are indifferent. Refusal to work overtime except at a much higher rate of pay would make it necessary for the manufacturers to concern themselves in this matter, and there seems to be no real reason why it could not be better adjusted.

Wages.—In any investigation the question of wages is difficult to answer accurately, and in the shirtwaist trade, with its seasonal variations, the wide extent of the piece-work system, and the resentment from the strike still smouldering between employers and employees, the difficulties were doubled.

In talking to the workers, the present wage was obtained, i.e., the wage received for the week just prior to the interview; an estimate of the prevailing wage during the busy season and the prevailing wage during the slack season; and an accurate statement of the highest and lowest earnings in a single week during the past year. The number of weeks busy and the number of weeks slack was also obtained and the average weekly wage for the year worked out from these figures. The result is shown in Table V.

Only seven manufacturers would show their payrolls, and

even these seven showed only certain things, usually choosing a girl receiving high wages and showing her earnings through the year as a typical case. As the estimates which they gave were always based on the wages during the busy season, with no allowance for the slack season, their figures were of little value.

TABLE V
AVERAGE WEEKLY WAGE DURING PAST YEAR AS GIVEN BY WORKERS
INTERVIEWED

	WAGE GROUPS						Total
	\$3-4.99	\$5-6.99	\$7-8.99	\$9-10.99	\$11-12.99	\$13-15.99	
Sample makers...	..	..	..	3	2	1	6
Operators.....	1	8	19	21	9	4	62
Drapers.....	..	..	..	3	..	..	3
Finishers.....	5	4	1	1	..	..	11
Pressers.....	..	..	..	1	2	1	4
Miscellaneous...	1	1	..	..	..	..	2
Total.....	7	13	20	29	13	6	88

When high wages do occur in the shirtwaist trade, they are very striking. The great fluctuation in wages is caused largely by variations in the amount of work during the different seasons. But it is also caused by the differences and changes in the price scale that is set by the employer. A price scale has to be adjusted for every operation that is done by the piece, and it has to be changed with the different styles made and the different materials that are used. It is a very difficult thing to adjust. Sometimes the unit of measurement is the "stitch," which is a single seam or a single tuck—one "run" of the machine. Sometimes the scale is set according to the operation. From 25 cents to \$1.00 a dozen is usually paid for sleeves and about 8½ cents a dozen for setting them in. When the unit of measurement for the machine work is the whole waist, the price varies from \$1.00 to \$12.00 a dozen. A waist that a factory hand sews for 20 cents retails for about \$3.75; a 60-cent waist retails for as much as \$15.00.

Manufacturers differ a great deal in their schemes for setting the price scale. Nearly all of them will admit that they sometimes make mistakes in setting the rate. The scale is often

readjusted, and in one shop the workers were even given back pay. But with all the readjustment, these variations in the price scale, as the styles are changed, have much to do with the fluctuations that are so marked in the wages of the shirtwaist workers. A perhaps extreme instance of this was shown in the case of two sisters, who worked as partners. They were skilled operators and sometimes made as high as \$16 a week apiece. One week the shop was put to work on a new style of linen dress. The price for the dress was fixed by the boss, who put about the same price on it as the girls had been getting for a dress on which they had worked the previous week. At the end of the week, however, everyone's wages had been greatly reduced. The two girls who usually made from \$12 to \$16 a week each, received \$4 each. There was a protest from the employees and the next week the scale was readjusted, but the girls did not receive any back pay.

The wages of piece-workers and week-workers were compared, and it was found that, although the week-workers have a decided advantage in steadiness—their average lowest wage being 61.8 per cent. of their average highest wage, while the lowest wage of the piece-workers is only 32.3 per cent. of their highest wage—still the piece-workers have the advantage in the higher average wage return for the entire year. The average weekly wage of the piece-workers was \$9.78; that of the week-workers, \$8.32.

The investigation showed, then, long hours, a great deal of overtime work, sharp fluctuations in wages owing to the seasonal character of the work and the shifting price scales, and a complete lack of any standards as to wages or methods of business among the manufacturers.

How are these conditions to be bettered? Even such laws as we have, restricting the hours of labor for women, are being violated constantly, owing to inadequate inspection and the difficulties in the way of ascertaining violations. If, however, the workers in a factory are organized, it means that the union is on the watch every working hour of the day and can not only see that the law is enforced, but, if strong enough, can secure

far better conditions than can be obtained through legislation. Through the organization of the shirtwaist trade, the hours have been reduced for practically the whole trade in this city to 52 a week, except during the rush seasons when overtime is required. The union aims to limit this overtime to six hours a week, two hours a night for not more than three nights, and to cut out Sunday work. This would make a 58-hour week for the rush weeks. It is probable that this limit has practically been secured for most of the union shops. When it is remembered that before the strike some shops were, by actual count, working during the rush season 70 hours, it will be seen what a tremendous gain in this direction the union brought about within four months. Certainly it would be hard to find a union shop now where the 60-hour limit of the law is ever overstepped.

A strong union should eventually be able to secure the abolition of night work entirely and, in addition, fair wages and a clean shop. Individual workers dare not fight for the enforcement even of the law as to sanitary conditions, for fear of being discriminated against, but the union can attack these evils fearlessly. Fairer wage scales can also be secured through collective bargaining. It is especially necessary in a trade like this, where the change in styles causes a constantly shifting price scale, that the workers themselves shall have a voice in the setting of the price for a piece of work. In the union shops the workers are represented by a price committee, or a shop delegate in the smaller shops, whose duty it is to go over all price scales with the manufacturer.

There are of course many difficulties still. The workers have not won everything with one blow, and conditions in many union shops are still far from satisfactory. Nevertheless, the first great step has been taken. The workers have been aroused to the need of organization and the lessons of unionism have been widely taught. The rest of the way will not be easy nor is it likely to be free from mistakes, but the journey has commenced along the road to a well-organized trade.

PEARL GOODMAN AND ELSA UELAND

NEW YORK CITY